



THE ASTONISHING BEAUTY OF CHHAU MASK: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART OF CHARIDA VILLAGE OF PURULIA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Bengal, a land of beauty and prosperity in its cultural ancestry. The tradition is enriched by diverse folk art of various tribes and ethnic groups creating the uniqueness. Music, dance have great importance for recreational, aesthetic and cultural aspect of the state. The cultural background, social value and structure, history, religion and mythological concept are also reflected by the traditional folk art. Different types of folk art are found in West Bengal. Among them, Patachitra and Madhubani are respectively the traditional style of painting, characterized by their mythological stories and intricate designs. The other folk arts with great traditional significance are the embroidery art locally called, Kantha and metal casting technique based Dokra. The Chhau Mask making art is one of them important traditional folk art, essential for the age old Chhau dance. The present paper is empirical and qualitative in nature, mainly focused on the traditional folk art of Chhau Mask, an integral part of Chhau dance, of Charida village, its making procedure and people associated with the mask making economy.

KEYWORDS: Chhau Dance, Chhau Mask, Charida, Folk Art

INTRODUCTION

India is a country of cultural plurality with its rich cultural value, language, custom, ideal, religion, caste and communities, where, a large variety of folk arts enrich the glory of our nation. Chhau is one of the oldest folk dance pattern of Bengal, specially practiced by the artisans of Eastern part of India. It is very popular in the adjacent tribal areas like Mayurbhanj of Orissa, Seraikella of Jharkhand and Purulia of West Bengal and practiced in the form of three different styles i.e. Purulia Chhau of West Bengal, Mayurbhanj Chhau of Orissa and Seraikella Chhau of Jharkhand. The present study mainly focusses on the very famous Chhau mask making culture of Charida village of Purulia as an integral part of Chhau dance. In the year 2010, Chhau dance of Purulia was included in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list and in 2018, Chhau masks were awarded by Geographical Indication (GI) tag.

Purulia Chhau is a folk dance form where, the movements of the dancers are very much vigorous. In the remaining categories of Eastern part of India, the dance movements are sophisticated and expressive also by nature. In Seraikella and Purulia Chhau dance forms, variety of masks are used in their performances, but in Mayurbhanj Chhau dance form, the dancers perform with facial expressions, body movements and gestures without using any mask (Patnaik, 1997). Purulia Chhau, an oral dance tradition, has been continued without any modification through generations. The dance movements, postures etc. are appeared in body form and the beautiful expressions. The musicians play the musical instruments with dance movements and the dancers wearing masks and colourful costumes of different characters (Kumar et.al, 2024). India's tribal and rural communities have a long history of demonstrating their artistic expertise through a vibrant array of art and cultural practices. Beyond their aesthetic

appeal, these folk art forms have played a vital role in shaping the country's cultural heritage. In West Bengal's districts like Purulia, Bankura and West Midnapur, various folk dances like Nachni, Natua and Chhau have thrived. Among these, Chhau Dance stand out for its global popularity (Maity, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present qualitative research paper is empirical in nature, but secondary data sources were also used to enrich the research framework. Observation, Semi-structural Interview, Life history, Photography, Audio-visual devices were the important Anthropological methods and techniques, applied for primary data collection on studied area, Charida village, Baghmundi C. D. Block, Purulia District in West Bengal. On the other hand, secondary data were collected from various documents such as journals, magazines, books, related articles, social media and internet respectively.

Findings and Discussions

Origin of the word Chhau: Chhau, the traditional folk dance has possibly derived from the Sanskrit word, "Chaya", meaning shadow or mask. It is also assumed that the term "Chhau" has originated from the word "Chadma", signifying concealment or "Chhauni", or from Oriya term "Chhauni"- meaning military camp. Some opines, this folk dance form has got its name from the term "Chhua", a boy in Kurmal, as "Chhua" is mainly a boy's dance. The traditional dance form was predominantly performed during Chaitra Sankranti on the occasion of Gajan Utsav (worshipping of Lord Shiva). The performance is a way of pleasing the god and ensuring a good harvest. The Chhau performers practiced rigorously throughout Bengali month Chaitra, where in present time, the dancers perform throughout

the year for high demand in India and abroad.

Global recognition:

Among famous Chhau artists, Gambhir Singh Mura is the legend of our country who received the Padma Shri in the year 1981 for introducing Chhau dance to the entire world and awarded by the countries like England, France, Japan and the US and became a renowned cultural ambassador.

Socio- cultural importance of Chhau Dance and different Palas:

In Chhau dance, "Pala" is the narrative or plot that the dancers enact through their performance basically telling the stories from Hindu mythology, epics, folklore, tales of a particular region or community. Several types of "palas" in Chhau dance are Mahabharata Pala, Ramayana Pala, Shiva Pala, Krishna Pala, Mahishasura Mardini Pala, Local folk Pala etc. With hearts full of devotion, dancers perform the Chhau dance, seeking to appease the divine forces and bring joy and prosperity to their lives. Through this dance, they aim to bring harmony and balance to the world. Normally, the Chhau dance is performed in an open place or area locally known as "Aasor", where male dancers take center stage. The dance is characterized by its rhythmic movements, perfectly synchronized with lively beats of traditional folk music. The melodic sound of Indian instruments like mohuri (a traditional wind instrument), shehnai and flute or reed pipes, accompanied by a dynamic ensemble of drums, including the deep resonant tones of the dhol (a cylindrical drum), the robust beats of the dhamsa (large drum) and the sharp cadences of the kharka (cymbal) create a vibrant and energetic sound tract for Chhau dance.

Charida – "The Mukhosh Gram" or "Mask Village":

Charida, also known as Chorida or Chorda is a village, located in the Baghmundi Community Development Block, within the Jhalda Sub-division of Purulia District in the Indian State of West Bengal. Charida is renowned for its exquisite Chhau masks, a vital element of the Purulia Chhau dance. This revered craft boasts almost 150 years legacy, originating during the reign of King Madan Mahan Singh Deo of Bagmundi, has a great cultural significance and historical importance.

Variety of masks:

In Chhau dance, mask plays a vital role in the performance. Different masks are used to depict various characters in Chhau dance. They are, Divine masks, symbolizing Gods and Goddesses such as Shiva, Durga, Krishna etc.; Demon masks, representing evil characters like Ravana, Mahishasura; Animal masks, representing animals like lion, tiger etc. Generally, production of masks of village Charida are done for two main purposes, for dancing and for home decorating respectively. The dancing masks are light in weight, flexible for expressive movements, while, the decorative masks are rigid, heavy in weight, and made with durable materials.

The mask making method of Charida village:

The Chhau dance revolves around intricately crafted masks, with Charida village serving as the primary center for their creation. The Sutradhar community, originally from Burdwan,

was brought to Charida by the King Madan Mohan Singh Deo around 150 years ago to create idols for his palace. Today, these masks form the backbone of Charida's socio-economic structure. Most of the villagers, including both men and women irrespective of age are engaged in this family-based craft, passing down their skills throughout the generations.

Raw material: The raw materials used to create Chhau masks are a combination of natural material like clay, water, cloth, coal ash and paper, adhesive and decorative elements like beads, varnish, artificial flowers, peacock plumes etc. Some materials are collected from local suppliers, while others are procured from Kolkata.

The Process:

The process of Chhau mask making is very innovative and artistic in nature. People of Charida village work with full dedication and use their skill in creating beautiful masks very passionately.

The mask making process is followed by several stages:

Stage1:

At first a Model is made of mud according to the desired object, then it is dried in sunlight.

Stage 2:

After drying of the model, ash is applied over the model, then paper cuts soaked in diluted adhesive are affixed on the upper surface of the model.

Stage 3:

After drying of the structure a thin coat of clay is applied and dried in sunlight.

Stage 4:

The dried structure is covered by a thin layer of cotton cloth, dipped in mixture of glue and water or a natural adhesive like flour paste. Then it is kept under the sunlight for drying.

Stage 5:

The final outcome of the mask is detached with the help of a wooden tool, locally known as Thapi", from the core structure.

Stage 6:

The mask is smoothened by "Thapi" and eyes and nose etc. are made by hand and tools.

Stage 7:

In this stage the mask is coated by white colour and again dried under the Sun. Then the artists paint with vibrant colours according to the nature of mask.

Stage 8:

Then the coloured mask is very nicely decorated by the artists. The female members and the children also take part in painting and decorating. Different types and coloured beads, artificial flowers, coloured plastic feathers, peacock plumes are used for the final look of the mask, which makes the product more attractive.

Finally, the masks are dried properly and get ready for the viewers.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper emphasize on the importance of Chhau masks of Charida village of Purulia which are the integral part of the region's cultural treasure, indicating the rich folk traditions and artistic expression of the local communities. The present paper also unveils the historical significance, cultural importance, social value and underlying structure, artistic excellence of Purulia Chhau. This traditional folk dance form is not only restricted within local communities but also, has gained the global recognition. The masks of Charida are not only used in Chhau dance but also has great demand in decorating purpose. The people of Charida almost depends on mask making economy. Charida village is a unique combination of culture, folk art and its natural scenic beauty which attracts the tourists throughout the year and strengthen their primary economic structure. The preservation of this age old oral folk tradition is mostly needed for future generation.

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